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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief review of the ways in which a church has incorporated art activities, particularly drama, in its ministry. The contents of the paper include a discussion of the initiation of and planning for a church theater, a description of the activities offered as part of the drama program, an overview of the staffing of the drama program, a look at community reaction to the program, a discussion of the administration of the program, and a listing of the assumptions on which the church is basing further development of the drama program. (WR)

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The Drama Program of the First Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne: A Case Study

David A. McCants

The First Presbyterian Church is located in the heart of the City of Fort Wayne. Its 2,500 members reside among the four corners of the greater metropolitan community which numbers 300,000 inhabitants. A professional staff of 9--including 5 clergymen, a minister of music, an organist, a nursery school director, and a drama director--serve the congregation in the administration and direction of a diverse ministry throughout the Fort Wayne community. The many programs and activities include Sunday worship services, celebration of special holy days, the Sunday church school for children and youths, adult education seminars, youth fellowship groups and adult circles, the weekday nursery school, personal counseling and personal growth groups, a host of benevolences, and specialized ministries in a portion of the inner city known as the West Central Neighborhood. The newest form of ministry is the church drama program.

The drama program began in 1968 upon the completion of the church's 322-seat theater. All of the drama program activities are not conducted in the theater. The modern, well-equipped theater facility is, however, a tangible representation of the congregation's strong commitment to incorporating the dramatic arts into its Christian ministry. And its presence has been a strong influence in shaping the character of the drama program.

I know of few congregations which have developed theaters as part of the church physical plant. And I know of few congregations which have used drama activities as a major form of programming. Perhaps the First Presbyterian experience may seem to you, as it first did to me, not only unusual but unnatural. Within the context of activities, though, that is the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne, the facility and the program are not only natural but in harmony with the philosophy which guides other parts of the church's program.

I could spend the entire twenty minutes justifying the claim of harmony between the drama program and other of the church's forms of ministry. In explanation let me offer a brief review of the other ways this church has incorporated art activities in its ministry. Visual art is at present receiving much attention. The lobby of the church's theater serves as a gallery for shows planned by a member of the

parish. The work of midwest artists representing a variety of media is featured. A parish show is held annually. Also art from the weekday nursery school and Sunday church school is displayed annually. Banners, designed by a member of the congregation, are used frequently to adorn the sanctuary and in processions on special holy days. Recently several religious paintings and reliefs have been purchased for hanging in the foyers and public rooms of the church building. The architecture of the church plant and its decorations, especially of the serene sanctuary, make extensive use of Christian symbols and fine craftsmanship for creating an atmosphere appropriate to worship.

The art of music has been a rich part of the church's ministry for many years. The sanctuary houses an Aeolian Skinner organ. The church organist and minister of music, serve as accompanist and director for six choirs. The music staff prepare special musical programs for worship often using instrumental ensembles for accompaniment. They serve as music educational personnel in the weekday nursery school. They also manage a national organ playing contest and a music series, consisting of six concerts by professional artists and groups. Recently dance has been incorporated in services of worship. Film series have been sponsored in conjunction with the adult education program. These varied activities attest the congregation's strong disposition to recognize artistic expression as a natural and eloquent mode of Christian witness. There is evidence of a growing interest among the congregation to nurtue a creative relationship between art and religion. The expansion of the religious arts ministry to include the drama--even though it is usually viewed as the most secular of the arts--is natural and harmonious to the ministry of Fort Wayne's First Presbyterian Church.

At the First Presbyterian Church physical plans for a theater were developed in advance of programming. Among the staff the chief advocate for a drama program has been the church organist. When he and the present minister of music joined the staff in 1951, they noted that the architectural plans for the new church plant did not include any space suitable for plays, lectures, films, or concerts. The architect responded to this need by submitting plans for a large rectangular room, with a platform at one end, and an eight-foot ceiling. The Religious Arts Ministry staff persuaded the Session to reject these plans. Plans for a theater were postponed, but they were not postponed indefinitely. Phased occupancy of the new plant began in 1956. Eight years later, 1964, following much discussion and the active promotion of the Religious Arts staff, James Hull Miller was contracted to design the church theater.

James Hull Miller is a pioneer of the free-form open stage. The theater which he designed for the First Presbyterian Church features a modified thrust stage with an arcade. The thrust can be enlarged by covering the orchestra pit. The arcade encloses an inner acting area at the stage level and forms a portico supporting an acting area above. The colonnade of the arcade is fitted with removable screen panels. Fitted with translux screen panels, images may be projected from the rear. The stage is 43 feet wide. When the pit is covered the stage at center is 27 feet deep. The arcade adds another 10 feet. The open wings are 5 feet wide. The arcade, the stage columns and the wings are of the same materials as the walls of the auditorium: plaster and hardwoods. The lighting booth at the rear of the theater houses an auto trans type Hub board and a simple sound console. The house contains a starter set of lighting instruments, concealed by ceiling battens. A limited amount of storage space and a small shop is available. Two well-lighted dressing rooms, with toilets and showers, are located backstage on the second floor. The intimate theater offers excellent sight lines; the playing area is generous. The ceiling height is three feet shorter than recommended in Hull's original plans, but additional excavation costs were considered prohibitive. The open stage functions well for recitals, lectures and meetings, as well as plays.

A variety of activities have been offered as part of the drama program. Dramatic and readers theater presentations have been prepared for services of worship, especially on occasions such as Youth Sunday, Good Friday, and Christmas Eve. A full-length musical was produced as a junior and senior high fellowship project. Puppet shows have been prepared by and for the Sunday church school. Creative drama activities have been incorporated into the programs of the weekday nursery school. Performances by touring companies have been featured. The Theater Series, since 1972-73, has presented a bill of five plays. Although most of the drama program activities are directed by the members of the Religious Arts staff, the presence of the theater has stimulated others to undertake drama activities. For the past three years the Women's Association has produced original pageants.

From its inception until the fall of 1972 the drama program was staffed mainly by overload and part-timers. The Religious Arts Ministry staff: two expert musicians, projected programming in consultation with the clergy staff, administered--and to a large degree directed--the activities. Lay members of the congregation directed programs such as Good Friday services, and professionals, mostly from the

community, guest-directed productions in the Theater Series. In the first three seasons, however, the music staff lent much expertise and effort to the Theater Series by scheduling many musical productions.

A full-time drama director joined the Religious Arts Ministry staff in the fall of 1972. The creation of this position recognized the status of the drama program to be equal with other ministries, and the appointment of a director placed the program under the supervision of an expert in drama. When the first director was hired in 1972, the Session created a Drama Committee with the primary function of advising in matters of policy, operational procedures, and program content and development.

Needless to say, I suppose, that 1972 to 1974 has been very much a time of finding a way, of charting a course. In the spring of 1974 the Session approved adding a half-time person to the drama staff. Some of us like to believe that we persuaded the Session that a course had been charted. Others, assuredly cynics, attribute the Session's decision to create the position of Assistant Drama Director to the fact that to date the salaries of the director and the half-time assistant have been underwritten almost entirely by a donor.

The drama program of the First Presbyterian Church has received favorable press among the parish and the community. Attendance at parish and public events has been most encouraging. Critics' evaluation of the artistic merit of drama productions have certainly been favorable. Expansion of the staff is a good measure of the opinion about the merit of drama activities as a mode of ministry. These significant evidences of success, however, should not obscure the fact that the program's future is underwritten in large part upon faith that the experience of the past two years has been a time of testing. The program is not without defects and limitations. Neither is it without critics who call attention to them.

The most serious criticisms center upon programming. Some believe that the program has been too much community-oriented, not enough parish-centered. Others believe that the program has been too much adult-oriented, not enough children and youth-centered. The great emphasis upon the Theater Series, the most conspicuous and elaborate part of the program, accounts in large part for both criticisms. During the past two years the direction of five major productions for the Theater Series has consumed most of the time and energy of the drama director. Most of the plays have been adult attractions. Auditions have been open to the entire community and performances have been advertised for the public.

The position of the Drama Committee and the Religious Arts staff is that the Series should not be sacrificed in order for the director to expend energies elsewhere. The Drama Committee reasons that the Theater Series is a very visible area of the church drama program because it has been successful. The Committee believes that continuity in its schedule, open auditions, and performance for the entire community are critical conditions for attracting large audiences and maintaining high artistic standards. The Theater Series, in the opinion of the Committee, has established "a standard of excellence by which to measure the other aspects of the church's drama program." In a review of the program early this year the Committee said: "Inferior dramatic productions will serve God no better than inferior music, sermons, or personal witness."

For the total church drama program the Committee claimed the following accomplishments:

1. The program has developed an awareness of human relationships and ethical dilemmas which could not have been accomplished by any other medium or aspect of the church's program;

2. The program has created respect for the church in important groups not usually inclined to expect artistic and social leadership from religious institutions;

3. The program has enhanced the reputation of the church among the general community of cultured citizens; and

4. The program has stimulated interest in an important art form among young people, the creators and consumers of art and religion in the future.

By admitting that these accomplishments were largely attributable to the Theater Series, the Committee acknowledged that the aims of developing children's theater, of using creative drama in the educational programs of the church, of incorporating drama in worship and other parish activities had not been equally realized. The future holds the revelation whether the past, especially the past two years, has welded a church staff and lay board inexperienced with incorporating drama into the church's ministry into a team that will fulfill their own and others' expectations.

The administration of the program has been efficient, and the program has been managed with economy. The members of the music staff serve as instrumentalist and musical director for musicals and operettas. One of them also functions as theater manager. The 1973 drama program, salaries excluded, required a subsidy of only $1,000.

The Drama Committee consists of five lay persons from the congregation, the senior pastor and members of the Religious Arts Ministry staff. The congregational members include a university teacher of speech-communication, a manager of a television station, a university teacher of English literature, a practicing artist, who also manages the church's art gallery, and a representative of the Session. The members have a well developed interest in the arts and a strong commitment to the church drama ministry.

The Committee has taken its assignment seriously and played an active role in winning support for expansion of the drama staff. An important role of the Committee is approval of the theater bill, for the selection of plays is a source of disagreement and sometimes controversy. The church's most controversial production was the 1972 production of The Trial of the Catonsville Nine. Other plays because of theme or language have elicited considerable complaint.

The drama program of Fort Wayne's First Presbyterian Church is a major effort to develop a church drama ministry which in scope is comprehensive and in execution is integrated with the ministries of worship, education, and service. It is building upon the following assumptions:

1. that the drama can bring people to that shock or recognition, that ethical offense, which prompts change, and that such risk is near the very heart of the Christian message;
2. that the use of dramatic literature and creative expression are as appropriate to religious education as to secular education;
3. that drama activities are effective evangelical devices, bringing many people to the church and to the program as participants as well as members of audiences who would not be attracted by other offerings;
4. that a proper function of a church is the provision of entertainment;
5. that Christians grow personally by association with others in cooperative projects.

A definitive judgment of the First Presbyterian Church's Drama Program must come at some future time. At present there is strong support for the philosophy which guides it, admiration for the vision that has provided quality facilities, appreciation for the persistent effort of a Religious Arts Ministry staff that is

committed to finding the unity of art and religion, and warm cooperation among clergy and laity who are eager to use fresh and varied methods in the service of Christian ministry.